

CHAPTER 5

COUNTERPROLIFERATION: SHY OF WINNING

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Hostile nations with nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons and the ability to deliver them over long distances pose a growing threat to the United States. In recent years, the U.S. Government has invested a substantial amount of capital—both diplomatic and financial—to halt the proliferation of such technology. While current efforts to stem the spread of strategic weapons and limit the damage they cause are both necessary and useful, neither individually nor in combination do they constitute a winning formula for combating proliferation. The reason is simple: neither consciously leverage the comparative strengths of the United States and its allies against the enduring weaknesses of specific proliferators. To do this requires the development of more competitive strategies that would encourage proliferators to spend more time and effort shoring up their weaknesses and less acquiring capabilities that can threaten the United States, our friends and allies.

From Nonproliferation to Counterproliferation.

The United States has historically pursued two approaches to combating the proliferation of strategic weapon technology. Until the late 1980s, the U.S. Government focused upon nonproliferation policies aimed at halting the spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) weapons and missiles. Nonproliferation policy, formulated largely by the State Department, attempts to prevent states from acquiring strategic weapons technology by promising them rewards and threatening them with

sanctions. It is, at its heart, a diplomatic policy that is aimed at establishing a norm against the possession of WMD. Such an approach is embodied in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Biological Weapons Convention, as well as export control regimes such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group, Australia Group for chemical weapons, and the Missile Technology Control Regime.

There are several problems with looking to diplomacy to halt the spread of WMD. First, diplomatic measures have limited utility for dealing with those states that are of greatest concern to the United States. Many of these regimes are unlikely to limit their strategic weapons capabilities, and even less likely to adhere to any treaties they sign. Determined states can and will cheat on agreements that restrict their access to strategic weapon technology, as Iraq's record of violating the NPT. While North Korea agreed in 1994 to halt its nuclear weapons program in exchange for a massive infusion of U.S. and South Korean economic aid, there have been persistent reports that Pyongyang's nuclear activities continue.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the U.S. Government began to augment its efforts to prevent the proliferation of strategic weapon technology with measures to limit the damage they could cause if used. While current nonproliferation policy seeks to create a norm against the possession of WMD, counterproliferation accepts the spread of such weapons as inevitable. Indeed, counterproliferation policy represents a tacit acknowledgment of the limits of current nonproliferation policies. While nonproliferation is primarily a diplomatic approach, counterproliferation has a strictly military focus. It seeks to augment preventive efforts with measures to protect U.S. forces, friends, and allies by acquiring passive chemical and biological defenses; deploying theater missile defenses; and improving our ability to attack nuclear, biological, and chemical production and storage facilities and missile launchers.¹ Some have even argued that current and projected efforts to

defend against WMD will yield a “revolution in counter-proliferation affairs.”²

Why Counterproliferation is Uncompetitive.

The main difficulty with counterproliferation policy stems from the fact that defense against WMD and missiles is extremely difficult. The United States currently lacks the ability to destroy the deeply buried facilities that many states use to produce and store WMD and missiles. Nor have the U.S. armed forces developed the capability to find and attack mobile missile launchers or reliably destroy missiles in flight.³ By focusing on defense against WMD and missiles, the United States is operating from a position of considerable weakness. Indeed, we may be playing a game that we cannot win.

Indeed, in a number of cases, counterproliferation policies divorced from a larger strategic context may prove counterproductive. For example, one way to reduce the threat to U.S. forces from WMD and missiles is to improve passive defense measures. Some argue that because the spread of WMD and missiles increases the vulnerability of American forward bases, U.S. armed forces should increasingly operate “off-shore” or from the continental United States. While measures to protect U.S. forces abroad against an expanding range of threats are laudable, they do bear a cost. The forward deployment of U.S. forces across the globe deters aggression, bolsters alliance commitments, ensures access to natural resources, and ultimately fosters regional stability. Were the United States to remove its forces and forward bases from allied territory, we would render our friends and allies more susceptible to coercion by regional aggressors and might tempt them to acquire WMD of their own.

One can imagine situations in which the clumsy deployment of active defenses would undermine U.S. national security as well. Improvements to China and North Korea’s missile arsenals are increasing interest in ballistic

missile defense in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. Indeed, ballistic missile defense can play an important role in allowing these states to resist coercion and protecting them against WMD. Yet we must be careful how we deploy theater ballistic missile defenses in Asia. An ill-conceived approach could easily spur China to expand and improve its arsenal in a way that would decrease the security of the United States, its friends and allies in the long run.

Ill-considered efforts to deter the use of WMD may also prove counterproductive. U.S. threats to respond to the use of chemical and biological weapons with nuclear weapons could, conceivably, accelerate efforts by potential adversaries to acquire their own nuclear weapons.

The point here is not that we should not attempt to protect U.S. forces, friends, and allies against WMD and missiles. Such measures are both necessary and desirable. We must, however, pay close attention to how we implement such policies.

More Competitive Strategies Needed.

Neither nonproliferation nor counterproliferation offers a formula for halting and rolling back WMD and missiles. What is needed is a new approach to weapon proliferation, one built upon a reasoned assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of each individual proliferator. Such an approach requires a detailed case-by-case assessment of those states that are interested in acquiring strategic weapons, one that yields an appreciation of their political objectives and value structure. It also requires a net assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the United States and potential proliferators. Such an assessment should yield a strategy to leverage U.S. strengths against the proliferators' weaknesses in such a way as to reduce the threat they pose to the United States and our friends and allies.

A competitive strategies approach to proliferation should proceed from the recognition that the United States is engaged in a long-term competition with a number of states that are seeking WMD. It is a competition because proliferators have goals—including the acquisition of WMD and missiles—that conflict with the objectives of the United States. Indeed, the spread of these weapons, among others, threatens to constrain the ability of the U.S. armed forces to project power across the globe in defense of U.S. national interests.⁴ Without the capability to intervene at the time and place of our choosing, we will face a diminished capability to protect our interests, either unilaterally or in concert with friends and allies. Such an approach to WMD would attempt to steer the competition in directions that allow us to reduce the danger these weapons pose to the United States by building on our strengths and exploiting our competitors' weaknesses. While commonsense, such an approach stands in stark contrast to current efforts to cope with proliferation, which attempt to redress U.S. weaknesses in the areas of passive chemical and biological defense and missile defense.⁵

Missile Defense: Counterproliferation or Competitive Strategy?

A central feature of any competition is interaction, and that between the United States and those seeking WMD is no exception. The competition is interactive, in that the United States has the ability—to a certain extent—to influence the behavior of proliferators, just as they have the ability—to a certain extent—to influence ours. The advent of the Defense Counterproliferation Initiative and the increased urgency of deploying theater missile defenses in response to the spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons and missiles is but one of the most obvious cases of interaction. The key to developing a winning strategy is to identify those political, military, and economic instruments that give us the greatest leverage over a particular proliferator.

A second feature of the competition is that it is long-term. Attempts by potential proliferators to acquire strategic weapons technology often unfold over years or decades, as do our efforts to deny them that technology. A strategic approach must therefore rigorously assess U.S. options and adversarial responses over years or decades. To take the above example a step further, the spread of theater ballistic missiles represents the first move in this competition, with the deployment of theater ballistic missile defenses the U.S. response. For our policies to be effective, however, we must also consider an adversary's potential counters to our response. While the United States has in recent years devoted increased attention to theater ballistic missile defense, it is unclear whether we have fully thought through the competition. If currently planned missile defense programs are successful, then the United States will possess by 2010 the ability to limit the amount of damage an adversary will be able to inflict upon our forces, friends, and allies. If we continue down this path, we should expect states with ballistic missiles to respond to our deployment of missile defenses. They may, for example, expand their missile arsenals in an attempt to overwhelm our defenses. They may also develop countermeasures against our defensive systems, such as separating warheads and decoys. Indeed, a recent assessment by the National Intelligence Council concluded that a number of states with ballistic missiles will develop or purchase missile defense countermeasures over the next 15 years.⁶ They may also attempt to change the terms of the competition by shifting from ballistic missiles to stealthy land-attack cruise missiles. Some of these moves could weaken our competitive position drastically. For the United States, the key challenge is to determine which moves strengthen our competitive position and which weaken it. We should then take actions that drive our competitor toward those actions we desire and away from those we do not.

Whether missile defenses will be effective will depend on whether or not the efforts to deploy them are part of a larger strategy to dominate the long-term competition against a specific proliferator. If U.S. missile defense efforts are not part of a larger strategy, they may succeed in being a counterproliferation move that limits possible damage for a short time, but a move with little chance of succeeding over the long term.

Toward A Competitive Strategies Approach to Proliferation.

History offers a number of compelling examples of competitive strategies, including the competition between the U.S. strategic bomber force and Soviet air defenses throughout the Cold War and U.S. Navy's adoption of the Maritime Strategy in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Of course, the American victory over the Soviet Union involved far more than military competition. Indeed, during the early 1980s, the U.S. Government developed a comprehensive strategy to contain and reverse Soviet expansion by competing effectively with the Soviet Union in all international arenas, to promote political and economic change within the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic system, and to engage the Soviet Union in negotiations to resolve outstanding disagreements. Moreover, the government used military, economic, political, ideological, and cultural levers to exploit weaknesses in the Soviet system.⁷ This more comprehensive competitive strategy played a central role in the U.S. victory over the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

What is needed now is a similarly comprehensive set of competitive strategies against proliferation. At the most basic level, our objective should be to reduce the threat that WMD and missiles pose to the United States, our friends, and allies. In the military realm, we may achieve this in a number of ways.⁸ First, we might seek to force a proliferator to divert resources away from WMD and missiles and

toward less threatening capabilities. We might, for example, attempt to convince him to shift assets away from systems that allow him to strike his neighbors. Second, we might seek to force proliferators to retain weapons that are relatively easy for us to defeat, rather than moving toward systems that are more difficult for us to counter. Regardless of the difficulty the United States is currently experiencing in developing an effective defense against WMD, it may very well be that it is easier to shoot down ballistic missiles than stealthy cruise missiles. If so, we should take steps that encourage proliferators to retain their ballistic missile forces rather than shift toward cruise missiles. Third, we might seek to render his investments in WMD and missiles obsolete as a way of imposing costs upon his regime. A truly effective theater ballistic missile defense system would do precisely this to ballistic missile arsenals. The best that can be hoped for from current and programmed missile defense systems is that they might reduce an adversary's faith in the combat effectiveness of his forces.

What is needed beyond purely military measures is a more general effort to convince proliferators that they cannot achieve their political objectives through the use of WMD. Such a strategy should be the result of a comprehensive net assessment of the enduring strengths and weaknesses of the United States, the proliferator, and other key players.⁹ A net assessment must include an in-depth understanding of why a particular state seeks WMD. What, in other words, are its motives and objectives? Both theorists and practitioners often assume that states seek WMD as a means of countering the military capabilities of regional rivals. While such motives often exist, in many—if not most—cases, internal politics also play a role. An understanding of these incentives may reveal levers that we can use to force proliferators away from WMD and missiles.

It is important to understand the value a particular state attaches to WMD. It is often assumed that states seeking WMD will mindlessly pursue their course no matter what

obstacles are thrown in front of them. In practice, however, states differ in the value they attach to the acquisition of strategic weapons. In some cases, a state's leadership views the possession of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons as an issue of national survival; in others it is not. Indeed, some states, such as Sweden, have eschewed WMD, even when the acquisition of such systems was clearly within their reach. In Sweden's case, the decreasing popularity of nuclear weapons, the prohibitive cost of acquiring an arsenal, the remote possibility of U.S. assistance, and divisions within the Swedish political leadership all contributed to the decision to forego nuclear weapons.¹⁰ The case illustrates the variety of factors that influence the decision to acquire WMD.

An understanding of the reasons that states renounce WMD can shed light upon levers that the United States can use to influence their behavior. The United States forced South Korea to halt its ballistic missile program both by exerting political pressure on Seoul and offering it access to a wide range of military technology. Indeed, the fact that allies look to the United States for political support as well as economic and military aid offers us a variety of levers that we can use to restrain their WMD and missile programs. The white government of South Africa decided to dismantle its nuclear stockpile when it became clear that it would cede power to a government representing the nation's black majority. The Argentine government of Carlos Menem shut down the Condor II ballistic missile program when it found out that the armed forces were developing the missile without the government's knowledge. The United States assisted Menem by providing him with detailed intelligence on the missile program, information that his own military had hidden from him. It also held out the prospect of access to Western financial markets and renewed military-to-military contacts if Argentina scrapped the Condor II.¹¹ In both South Africa and Argentina, regime change offered an opportunity to get a state to roll back proliferation. In some cases, the best policy

may be for the United States to remain aloof; in others we may want to actively assist the process.

Any effective strategy must take interaction into account. In many cases, proliferation may attempt to circumvent our leverage. A thoughtful strategy should anticipate these moves. What options does the proliferator have to counter our strategy? What path would we most like to see him follow? What can we do to ensure that he does follow that path? What paths would we least like to see him follow? What can we do to ensure that he does not follow these paths?

Seen in this light, current counterproliferation policy suffers from some significant shortcomings. It does not offer us the means to reduce the threat those weapons pose to the United States, our friends, and allies over the long term. The best it can do is limit the damage that an adversary can inflict upon our forces. While this is both necessary and desirable, it is by itself insufficient. Nor do current efforts to deal with WMD pit our strengths against the weaknesses of potential adversaries. Rather, too often we do the opposite. Passive defenses against WMD, active defenses against ballistic missiles, and attack operations against nuclear, biological, chemical, and missile production and storage facilities are insufficient to render an adversary's forces obsolete. Nor can they shift the terms of the competition appreciably. Rather, they force us to compete with proliferators on terms that are highly unfavorable to the United States. It is, for example, even unclear whether a protracted competition between third-world ballistic missiles and U.S. ballistic missile defenses will leave us better off.

More, of course, can be done to upgrade our counterproliferation efforts. We must develop a military strategy that pits our enduring strengths against the enduring weaknesses of potential adversaries. We should radically reconfigure our armed forces to reduce their vulnerability to WMD and missiles. The services should, for

example, study how to reduce their dependence upon vulnerable fixed infrastructure such as ports and airfields. Rather than closing with an adversary, they should explore options to allow them to strike an adversary from a distance. Similarly, they should develop concepts to reduce their vulnerability to WMD through dispersion and mobility.

In the end, however, there are inherent limits to what any counterproliferation initiative can accomplish by itself. The key to ultimate success lies in exploiting nonmilitary levers against potential adversaries. Certainly for many proliferators key weaknesses may be political, economic, and social, not military. We should think seriously about how to mobilize social and political forces within countries of concern to oppose the acquisition of WMD and missiles. Indeed, whatever military counterproliferation efforts the United States and its allies make should be designed to complement rather than undermine such efforts.

CHAPTER 5 - ENDNOTES

1. See Thomas G. Mahnken, "A Critical Appraisal of the Defense Counterproliferation Initiative," *National Security Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Summer 1999.

2. Ashton B. Carter and L. Celeste Johnson, "Beyond the Counterproliferation Initiative to a 'Revolution in Counterproliferation Affairs'," *National Security Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Summer 1999.

3. Dennis M. Gormley and Thomas G. Mahnken, "Facing Nuclear and Conventional Reality," *Orbis*, Winter 2000.

4. Thomas G. Mahnken, "Deny U.S. Access?," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 124, No. 9, September 1998.

5. David J. Andre, "Competitive Strategies: An Approach Against Proliferation" in Henry Sokolski, ed., *Fighting Proliferation: New Concerns for the Nineties*, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1996; Henry Sokolski, "Faking It and Making It," *The National Interest*, No. 51, Spring 1998, pp. 67-74.

6. National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Missile Developments and the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States Through 2015*, Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 1999, p. 8.

7. See National Security Decision Directive Number 75, reprinted in Robert C. McFarlane and Zofia Smardz, *Special Trust*, New York: Caddell and Davies, 1994, pp. 372-380.

8. Andre, "Competitive Strategies."

9. See Eliot A. Cohen, *Net Assessment: An American Approach* JCSS Memorandum No. 29, Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, April 1990; A.W. Marshall, *Problems of Estimating Military Power*, P-3417, Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, August 1966; and the chapters by George Pickett, James Roche, Barry Watts and Stephen Peter Rosen in Andrew W. Marshall, J.J. Martin, and Henry S. Rowen, eds., *On Not Confusing Ourselves: Essays on National Security Strategy in Honor of Albert & Roberta Wohlstetter*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991.

10. Paul M. Cole, *Sweden Without the Bomb: The Conduct of a Nuclear-Capable Nation without Nuclear Weapons*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1995, Chapter 5.

11. See Chapter 3. See also Daniel Santoro, *Operation Condor-2: The Secret History of the Missile Menem Dismantled*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Letra Buena, 1992.